

## Is the proposed school finance act an answer to Colorado's education funding woes? Yes

By Cindy Stevenson and George Welsh *The Denver Post*

Posted:

DenverPost.com

You have heard a lot of noise lately about a new school finance act for Colorado. It is long past overdue that we rethink how we fund schools in this state, and provide new revenues, after cumulative \$1.1 billion in cuts over the past four years.

These across-the-board cuts have come from suburban, rural, urban and small-town school districts across Colorado. Now is the time to discuss a funding solution that makes sense for the entire state. We represent very different student populations, hundreds of miles apart. Today, on this issue, we have one single voice. The finance act is an underlying, moral document that describes educational priorities for Colorado. It must work for all 863,000 K-12 students who attend public schools across our diverse state. It must also work for all 178 school districts.

We want the new act, embodied in Senate Bill 213, to help solidify the public trust across Colorado, in order to gain new revenues for a struggling system. Our system cannot possibly meet the needs of all kids in its current structure, especially those with language deficiencies, those with special needs and those who live in poverty. The current lack of revenue for our schools makes it tough to address achievement gaps, and to get every student in Colorado prepared for college and careers.

Colorado has embraced major educational reforms — new standards and assessments, new accreditation and accountability, new evaluation systems for teachers and principals based on student performance, and an all-out effort to get all students reading by third grade. Now is our chance to identify the costs associated with making sure these reforms work; SB 213 is the best opportunity that has come along in a generation.

A revision to the school finance act finally begins to address a growing deficit for our kids, which was highlighted by a district court decision in the Lobato case. Judge Sheila Rappaport declared Colorado's entire system for funding public schools, "irrational, arbitrary, and severely underfunded," and therefore in violation the Colorado Constitution.

We know our state will still have major structural problems on the revenue side of the equation, thanks largely to the legacy of interlocking constitutional constraints (TABOR, Gallagher and Amendment 23). This foundational issue needs to be addressed in the coming years, but it is important to take a first step now toward more sufficient and equitable school funding to ensure that today's students have a better chance. We cannot afford to wait for a perfect solution, especially for those who are in our schools today.

As the bill moves to the House Education Committee for consideration, there is still work to be done to understand each element of this important bill for funding public education. We encourage everyone to study the issues carefully, while communicating to forge a common understanding of them, with the goal to advocate for all children, and to provide a high quality public education system in Colorado.

Now is the time to come together for a better future for all Colorado students, in order to earn the public's support at the ballot in November.

Cindy Stevenson is superintendent of Jeffco Public Schools. George Welsh is superintendent of the Center

Consolidated School District. Dan Snowberger, superintendent, Durango School District 9-R, contributed to this essay. All are members of the Colorado Association of School Executives.

# GOP support due school-finance fix

The Daily Sentinel, April 7, 2013

The Colorado Senate last week approved a measure to revamp the state's school finance system and sent the measure to the House. But Senate support for the bill fell strictly along party lines.

That's unfortunate because Senate Bill 213 is an important measure that could have great benefits for school districts such as Mesa County's District 51, which has been perpetually at or near the bottom of the pack in per-pupil state funding.

Perhaps a few Republicans in the House will find the gumption to support the school-finance reform bill, as they did with the state budget bill Friday. The budget passed the Senate on a party-line vote, but in the House, nine Republicans joined Democrats to approve the measure.

Among the complaints about SB213 made by Republicans in the Senate was one by Sen. Mark Scheffel of Parker, who argued the bill shifts money around, "but (it) doesn't really reform how are kids are educated."

He's right, but there's a reason for that. This is a bill to reform school finance, not education in general. Republicans in recent decades have taken several stabs at broader education reform, with mixed results. They haven't addressed school finance.

However, there is little question the current school finance system is a disaster. When wealthy school districts such as Aspen and Cherry Creek receive more state funding per student than District 51 and other districts that serve large numbers of low-income students, something is definitely out of whack.

SB213 makes several changes to try to remedy that situation, including giving preference to small, rural school districts and those with high numbers of at-risk students.

Are Republicans opposed to trying to fix the inequity?

Another GOP objection to the legislation is that it will require a large influx of additional money to make it work — an estimated \$1.1 billion the first year it takes effect.

That's true, but the provisions of SB213 will only be implemented if voters approve a ballot measure this fall to raise state income taxes to provide the additional funding that's necessary for the bill's implementation.

We hope voters do approve the increased funding because we believe the changes authorized by SB213 are critically important and the additional money is necessary. But we recognize that it will be no easy task to persuade voters to pay more in taxes, even for such a worthy cause.

However, many Republicans in the Legislature and conservative columnists apparently object to even putting the question to voters and allowing them to decide.

SB213 will significantly improve the school-finance system in Colorado. It deserves bipartisan support. We hope it will find some in the House, especially from Mesa County's representatives, since schools they represent will benefit greatly.

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Article published Apr 2, 2013

## Durango schools do a turnaround on school-finance bill

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By Chase Olivarius-Mcallister Herald staff writer

In Colorado, education reform isn't easy.

When Sen. Michael Johnston, D-Denver, unveiled his sweeping education-reform bill this year, naysayers assured themselves that his bill would go down – the way of every other attempt at statewide education reform since 1994.

Yet on Tuesday morning, the Colorado Senate passed Senate Bill 213 20-15, with all Democrats voting in favor and all Republicans opposed, including Durango Sen. Ellen Roberts.

Perhaps more surprising than the bill's triumph in the state Senate was its victory at last night's meeting of Durango School District 9-R school board, which, after some trepidation, unanimously voted for a resolution supporting the measure.

Just two weeks ago, the district was a staunch opponent, with Durango Superintendent Daniel Snowberger traveling to Denver to lobby Sen. Johnston for its change after reading a first draft and discovering under its proposed financial scheme, Durango would be the "biggest loser."

"It's a lot better now," Snowberger said at the meeting.

Originally, the bill would have allotted \$8,293 to educating every student in Denver, while Durango students would have gotten just \$6,800.

Meanwhile, the bill originally called for Durango residents to pay \$12 million more a year through mill levy increases.

The original bill would have affected about 20 rural districts similarly to Durango, including Ignacio and Bayfield, obliging big increases in mill levies but offering little in increased school funding.

Last week, Snowberger travelled to Denver along with Bayfield Superintendent Troy Zabel and Ignacio Superintendent Rocco Fuschetto to campaign against the measure.

Major amendments have been attached to the bill since their visit.

Snowberger urged the board to pass the resolution supporting the amended bill because at this point its most egregious faults had been addressed, and whatever its shortcomings, the bill

offered the rare promise of progress in education across the state and in the district. "I believe it's the right message to send to the Legislature: Thank you for listening, working with us, bringing us to the table."

He also said it was the right message to send the community: "Right now, they've heard that Durango's ticked off, and that it's a bad bill. But we're no longer there," he said.

School board member Joe Colgan saluted Snowberger's outsized influence in Denver saying Sen. Johnston had recognized Durango on the Senate floor and joked that Johnston "doesn't do anything without talking to Snowberger first."

Snowberger said he'd actually been slightly terrified to find powerful lawmakers texting him.

With the amendments, Durango 9-R can expect, if the bill passes, an additional \$3.9 million in 2014-15, or \$554 extra per student. The big winner regionally would be Montezuma-Cortez, with an extra \$1,257 per student.

"Every district walks away with additional dollars as a result of this bill, and I think it's bad to say: 'If we're not a bigger winner than X, we won't support it,'" Snowberger said.

Some board members were still reluctant to issue a public statement of support.

Andy Burns wondered whether it would be best to remain neutral.

Julie Levy said the bill would provide for \$1 billion in new funding for K-12 education, yet Durango students would see "very little" of that money.

Snowberger said while the bill was far from perfect, Durango students would nonetheless see proportional increased funding.

Levy, relenting, said the resolution was narrowly worded, and only praised the amendments to Senate Bill 213.

Grinning, School Board President Jeff Schell said, "Yes, it's a very well-worded resolution."

District Spokeswoman Julie Popp said the bill no longer required the district to hit local homeowners with drastic mill levy increases, noting in its current version, the bill will be funded by statewide tax increases.

In a statement emailed during the school board meeting, Snowberger wrote, "while we had initial concerns over the original form of the bill, we are pleased with the amendments that were secured in the Senate and support it moving forward in the legislative process. We are equally pleased that there won't be a decrease in funding as the bill currently stands, which means we won't need to ask county residents to consider additional mills or taxes to achieve some increased funding within Durango."

The bill's author, Sen. Michael Johnston, D-Denver, said he got input from more than 2,000 Colorado education experts and advocates over two years to help him craft the bill.

But state Sen. Scott Renfroe, R-Greeley, said, "In my opinion, this is not reform. This is a billion-

dollar tax increase.”

Colorado lags behind the national average in school funding by \$2,500 per student, said state Sen. Rollie Heath, D-Boulder.

Herald Staff Writer Joe Hanel contributed to this report. [cmcallister@durangoherald.com](mailto:cmcallister@durangoherald.com)

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## **SUPPORT OF SB 13-213 PUBLIC SCHOOL FINANCE ACT Durango School District 9-R Board of Education**

- WHEREAS, The financing of Colorado's Public Schools has continued to be based on 1994 legislation that has limited school funding and presented an unsustainable model in school finance within the State of Colorado; and
- WHEREAS, Senate Bill 13-213 provides a new look at school funding encouraging innovation and investment in Public Education across the State of Colorado with measures of accountability in place; and
- WHEREAS, Senate Bill 13-213 recognizes the financial burdens on school districts in serving students who require English Language Development, are impacted by poverty, or require Special Education Services; and
- WHEREAS, Senate Bill 13-213 has been amended to prevent significant local property tax increases on citizens of La Plata County whose current mill levies have been driven down in compliance with the Tax Payer Bill of Rights (TABOR); and
- WHEREAS, Senate Bill 13-213 has been amended to provide districts who have experienced some of the lowest funding levels in the state with a guarantee of no less than 95% of statewide average total program per pupil;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Durango School District 9-R Board of Education hereby **SUPPORTS** this legislation and urges senators and house members to support it with amendments outlined above.

***Approved by formal action of the Board of Education on this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of April, 2013.***

  
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Jeff Schell, Board President

  
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Carol Smith, Board Secretary

